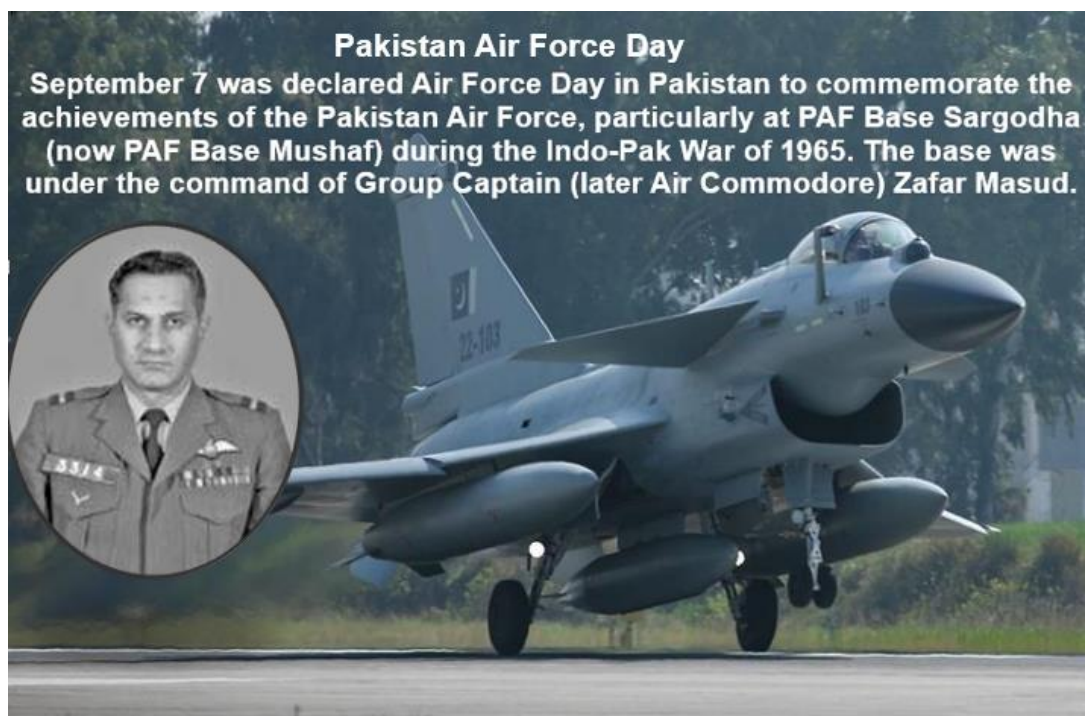


Air Commodore Zafar Masud: The Legend Behind Pakistan Air Force Day

By Nasim Yousaf



During the 1965 Pakistan-India war, the legendary Group Captain (later Air Commodore) Mohammad Zafar Masud served as the commander of the Pakistan Air Force's Sargodha Base. While the performance of other PAF bases was notable, it was Masud's strategic insight and inspirational leadership at Sargodha that played a particularly pivotal role in Pakistan's aerial victories. In recognition of Sargodha's significant contribution to the war effort, Pakistan Air Force Day was declared on September 7, and the Hilal-i-Istaqlal award was introduced in 1966 to honor the PAF's bravery. Masud later opposed the use of force in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and subsequently resigned.

Air Commodore Masud was not only among the pioneers who helped establish the Pakistan Air Force when India was partitioned in 1947, but he was also an outstanding officer with a brilliant record throughout his career. For example, in 1958, then Wing Commander Masud led a Pakistan Air Force team of pilots that set a world record in aviation history. During the 1950s, he also established the Fighter Leaders' School, the premier institution of the PAF, which today operates as the Combat Commanders' School. Masud later attended a Staff College course in England, where he was awarded the Best Foreign Student prize. Additionally, the publication of *The Story of the Pakistan Air Force: A Saga of Courage and Honour* was made possible by his efforts. Masud

led a team to undertake the PAF history project but never took credit for it, which is why his name is absent from the book.

Parliament Times



Mohsin Naqvi pays tribute to great sacrifices, unparalleled services of Pakistan Navy
| Back Page



Severe Jhelum floods pose a challenge for army to address economic challenges
| Back Page

The 1965 Indo-Pakistani War was a defining moment in Pakistan's military history, with the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) emerging as a symbol of strength and resilience. As the commander of Sargodha, then Group Captain Zafar Masud was responsible for safeguarding one of Pakistan's most critical defense installations. The airbase, situated in central Punjab, became the frontline in defending Pakistan's airspace against Indian attacks. Despite continuous bombardment and assaults, Masud's leadership ensured that Sargodha not only held its ground but also launched successful counterattacks, shifting the momentum in Pakistan's favor.

The significance of Sargodha Airbase and Zafar Masud's leadership did not go unnoticed by Pakistan's top military officials. Masud was awarded the Hilal-e-Jurat, the country's second-highest gallantry award, for his outstanding performance. President Mohammad Ayub Khan, Air Marshal Nur Khan (Commander-in-Chief of the PAF), and General Musa Khan (Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army) visited Sargodha to personally congratulate Masud and his team. A video of President Ayub's visit is available on Facebook and YouTube, highlighting the ceremonial acknowledgment of Sargodha's role. This visit was more than ceremonial; it was a testament to the base's central role in protecting the nation and maintaining air superiority.

President Ayub Khan expressed his admiration for Masud's leadership and the courage displayed by the pilots and ground crew under his command. Air Marshal Nur Khan, who had placed his trust in Masud to defend one of the country's most important military installations, praised his tactical brilliance. General Musa Khan acknowledged the base's essential role in supporting ground operations during critical moments of the war.



The success of Sargodha Airbase was not just due to Masud's leadership but also to the bravery and skill of the pilots who flew under his command, guidance, and training. Among the pilots who distinguished themselves was Squadron Leader Muhammad Mahmood Alam, famously known as M. M. Alam, who became a national hero after shooting down five Indian aircraft in under a minute, a feat unparalleled in aerial combat history. Other PAF pilots, such as Sarfaraz Ahmed Rafiqui, Yunus Hussain, and Imtiaz Bhatti, also contributed to the successful defense of Pakistan's airspace. Their achievements under Zafar Masud's command became legendary. The combination of Masud's leadership and the exceptional performance of these pilots ensured that Sargodha Airbase remained a stronghold of Pakistan's aerial defense.

As mentioned earlier, the outstanding performance of the Pakistan Air Force, particularly at Sargodha Airbase under Masud's command, became a source of national pride. It led to the declaration of Pakistan Air Force Day on September 7. This day honors the sacrifices, courage, and professionalism of the PAF, with Sargodha's contributions serving as the foundation for this recognition. Each year, Pakistan Air Force Day is commemorated to remember the heroes of the skies, including the brave pilots and the leadership of Zafar Masud, whose strategic brilliance made Sargodha Airbase a symbol of victory. Later, he was promoted to Air Commodore and sent to East Pakistan, where he headed the Pakistan Air Force in that wing of the country.

After the 1971 election, a political crisis emerged in East Pakistan. During a military briefing to President Mohammad Yahya Khan in Dhaka, Masud strongly recommended a political settlement instead of using military force to suppress the crisis. He warned that using force would lead to the country's disintegration. Yahya initially agreed but later changed his mind and ordered military action. As a result, Masud resigned, despite a brilliant career and being widely recognized as a potential future head of the Pakistan Air Force.

Yahya's decision not only led to the break-up of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh, but about 93,000 soldiers and civilians also became prisoners of war, bringing great humiliation to Pakistan. The nation, including myself, was deeply saddened by the break-up. For further information on Masud, read "Mitty Masud Folds His Wings" by Air Chief Marshal Jamal A. Khan, published in Dawn on October 13, 2003, and my book titled "Air Commodore M. Zafar Masud: A Pioneer of the Pakistan Air Force: The Story of the Man Who Sacrificed His Career in an Effort to Save Pakistan."

Air Commodore Masud passed away peacefully on October 7, 2003. His wife, Elisabeth Masud, a kind lady I knew and communicated with, remained by his side throughout his final days, and

friends from the Pakistan Air Force and beyond visited him frequently during his last months. The PAF honored him with a formal military funeral, and he was laid to rest in the air force cemetery at Nur Khan Air Force Base, Chaklala (Rawalpindi). The funeral was attended by several senior PAF officers, including Air Marshal M. Asghar Khan and Air Chief Marshal Jamal A. Khan.

In conclusion, Air Commodore Zafar Masud's leadership as commander of Sargodha Airbase during the 1965 war cemented his legacy as one of Pakistan's most respected military leaders. His strategic command ensured the PAF's success, and the achievements of his base primarily led to the establishment of Pakistan Air Force Day—a lasting tribute to the nation's bravery and resilience. May God rest his soul in eternal peace.

Note: A Facebook page dedicated to "Air Commodore Zafar Masud: The Legend Behind Pakistan Air Force Day" celebrates the remarkable contributions and heroic legacy of Air Commodore Zafar Masud. A YouTube channel dedicated to the same subject also exists. The links are as follows:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PakistanAirForceDay>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@AirCommodoreZafarMasud>

Scholar Nasim Yousaf, who has dedicated 28 years to documenting the history of the Indian subcontinent since 1996, has authored 19 books and digitized 19 rare works, including a 2.5-hour documentary. His detailed exploration of Masud's role and experiences provides valuable insights into the complex historical and military contexts of the region. In addition to his books, Mr. Yousaf has written several articles on Air Commodore Masud.

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